



# REPORT ON A SEMINAR REGARDING ARAB/ISLAMIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFORMATION CAMPAIGN

WAR ON TERRORISM STUDIES: REPORT 2

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## **QUICK LOOK REPORT: ISLAMIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S. INFORMATION CAMPAIGN**

**BACKGROUND.** The Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) conducted a workshop on the issue of Islamic and Middle Eastern perceptions of the information campaign in the War on Terrorism at the offices of the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Arlington, VA, on November 8, 2001. Participants included members of the Islamic and Arab-American communities and members of the Interagency community involved in the information campaign. The objective was to give the government representatives a perspective on how the campaign is being received by the worldwide Muslim and Arab communities.

### **GENERAL COMMENTS BY PARTICIPANTS**

The Islamic and Arab-American participants began by giving brief presentations on their perceptions of the American scene and their reaction to it since the events of September 11, 2001.

- One participant made three key observations:
  - (1) The Islamic community has not historically done a good job of getting its points made in American discourse, although he believed that they have done better of late.
  - (2) The Islamic community has let itself be portrayed as “others.”
  - (3) Terrorists are finding shelter in the Palestinian Issue; the moderate community is in danger of having the terrorists hijack this issue.
- From a public policy perspective in the region, there may be a danger in trying to link Hezbollah and Hammas to bin Laden. Many individuals who are appalled by bin Laden view these groups as freedom fighters. They cautioned that the linkage might not be helpful.
- Most Islamic and Arab-American citizens view themselves as Americans by choice.
- Most participants said they have been well treated by other Americans since September 11.
- In many U.S. Muslim communities, the trend is toward a more traditionally conservative brand of Islam as opposed to the harsh views of the Wahabe sect, radical Shiites, and the form of Islam practiced by the Taliban. However, several participants cautioned that many authoritarian secular regimes in the Middle East discourage these traditionally conservative movements as much as they do radicalism.
- Several female participants noted that women’s rights movements in the Islamic world tend to be sacrificed first by the authorities when fundamentalists agitate the status quo government.
- Participants noted that authoritarian regimes in the Middle East do not reflect the opinion of the man on the street. U.S. praise for such authoritarian regimes actually may hurt the perception of the U.S. held by the rank and file in Islamic

countries. One speaker argued for more people-to-people diplomacy by Arab-Americans. However, another noted that Arab-Americans who are working or residing in certain Islamic countries almost automatically are suspected of being CIA agents.

- People come to America to be free from persecution and live in a society with a well-established, well-functioning judicial system. The U.S. must be careful that in the pursuit of the terrorist, the civil liberties and justice system do not get sacrificed. This would play into the hands of terrorists and jeopardize the core principals that define America and what it stands for.
- There is no such thing as a moderate or "watered down" Muslim. Either one is a Muslim or is not. People do not identify themselves as radicals or moderates. The identity of Muslims is under a constant microscope, becoming a black and white issue. A Muslim with traditional values can be just as much an ally as one with secular values.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFORMATION CAMPAIGN**

There was a general and consistent theme throughout the discussion that the U.S. information campaign is naïve and does not adequately reflect the cultural sensitivities of Afghans, Arabs, and the Islamic world in general. The moderator asked the participants to comment on what they perceive to be the main topics of the information campaign.

The topics discussed were:

- (1) You are for us or against us
- (2) Bin Laden and Al Qaeda must be destroyed
- (3) This is a war on terrorism, not a war on Islam
- (4) The Taliban did not give up bin Laden and must suffer the consequences
- President Bush got high marks when he immediately called for tolerance of Muslims and Americans with roots in Muslim countries, and that Americans and the West should not blame the Muslim people for the actions of bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorists.
- One participant saw the U.S. "Surrender or Die" propaganda campaign against the Taliban as totally wrongheaded, and that the phrase "Wanted Dead or Alive" reflected negative images of the U.S. as the Wild West. Similarly, the words "Crusade" and "Infinite Justice," which were used early in the campaign, reflected negatively. When pressed for suggestions for what he would do differently, he suggested that the U.S. take into consideration the three prevailing themes of the Afghan psyche that may not have been taken into account in crafting that message:
  - (1) Revenge
  - (2) Sanctuary
  - (3) Hospitality
- There seemed to be a consensus among participants that U.S. support for moderate conservatives individuals or groups in the Islamic world would be

- tantamount to “a kiss of death” undermining their legitimacy and credibility. Thus, support for moderate conservative individuals or groups should be rendered covertly rather than overtly.
- Despite U.S. efforts to the contrary, the Taliban’s portrayal of the bombing campaign as an attack on innocents appears to be resonating in the Islamic world.
  - Several participants said that demonizing bin Laden is helping him in the Islamic world in the same way that the Iranians and Iraqis profited from defying America. The participants agreed that bin Laden is a real threat, but there was not a consensus on how to deal with his public relations appeal in the Islamic world.
  - Some participants believed that we should stress the fact that bin Laden, even though he has spoke out on the part of the Palestinians and the Iraqis, has never actually actively rendered support to them. However, other participants countered that such arguments are irrelevant given his reputation as a fighter first against the Soviet Union and now against America and Israel.
  - Several participants echoed the sentiment expressed in press accounts from the Islamic world that to date, the U.S. had not presented compelling evidence regarding bin Laden’s and Al Qaeda’s complicity in the September 11 terrorist acts. These participants expressed the belief that if the U.S. presented such evidence, it would strengthen the U.S. position in the court of public opinion. Although several U.S. government officials in the room were listening and understood this view, they pointed out that the reason for not releasing this information was to protect the sources and methods of this intelligence, which are classified.
  - Several participants pointed out that the Islamic world does not have a true perception of what happened to U.S. and innocents from more than 60 other nations on September 11. Images of structures being destroyed do not convey adequately the human cost, which might resonate better in the general population in the Islamic world. The media emphasis on the material destruction of several American icons has allowed the terrorists to effectively downplay the human cost of their heinous crimes.

## **OBSERVATIONS BASED ON ANALYSIS**

- The U.S. may want to explore the approach of portraying its conflict with bin Laden and his followers as justifiable revenge, while portraying them as taking unfair advantage of Afghan cultural values of honor and hospitality. However, in doing so, the U.S. might be invoking a clash of cultures. Revenge is not a recognized concept in the policies of liberal Western democracies, as is the concept of justice. Reconciling these competing concepts would be a challenge.
- The U.S. needs to understand that its policy of support for Israel -- and of several Middle Eastern regimes deemed to be illegitimate by some members of their populations -- will remain a challenge for crafting any successful information campaign. This is not a value judgment; it is merely a statement of fact.
- Personalizing the human loss of Americans and visiting foreign nationals in the World Trade Center at the time of the attack in a more effective manner throughout the Islamic world may be a useful tool. Putting a human face on the

- victims could potentially put more emphasis on what really was lost on September 11, as well as help rationalize America's response among Islamic populations.
- Presenting evidence of bin Laden's complicity in the September 11 attacks may not be as valuable as some participants suggest for reasons that they themselves point out in further discussions. U.S. credibility in the region is relatively low, and any evidence presented would likely be portrayed as contrived. Even taped confessions are likely to be presented as being altered electronically. Any presentation of evidence should be carefully considered to protect the sources vis-à-vis the potential advantages that might or might not be accrued in the information campaign.
- In preparing this analysis, one governmental participant pointed out that the Islamic-American participants were largely college educated and cosmopolitan members of their respective communities. This individual suggested that, in future events, we also include recent non-naturalized immigrants who have a more immediate feel for reaction on the streets.

## **DOGS THAT DID NOT BARK**

In any event of this sort, it is sometimes as interesting to note what did not surface in the discussions, as what did. In this case, there were two subjects that were noted as absent in post-event analysis:

- There was no suggestion from the group that there might be any alternative than to eliminate bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Some participants cautioned against demonizing him to a point that he is given unfounded prestige. Yet there was no argument against the eventual elimination of the Al Qaeda movement. Similarly, there was no discussion of the possibility that America may be creating justification for more terrorism as a result of its perceived "self-serving" policies toward Iraq and the Palestinians.
- There was no mention of the Ramadan religious holiday as an Information Operations topic.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The nature of this open-source venue does not lend itself to detailed policy recommendations, but several general recommendations appear to be appropriate:

- The U.S. may want to consider the formation of an Islamic-Middle Eastern community "Red Team" to review potential open source Information Operations themes with an eye toward making recommendations regarding cultural sensibilities.
- The concept of putting a more human face on the American approach to the conflict should be considered, as should the expanded use of American-Islamic citizens in the War on Terrorism.

In future efforts of this sort, the U.S. should consider including individuals who have recently arrived in the U.S. from the Islamic-Middle Eastern world.

A representative of the Arab press, who had been invited but unable to attend the seminar, mentioned in a telephone discussion that it is not so much the U.S. message that is being distrusted, but the messenger. He recommended that the U.S. be careful who is seen as the originator of a message. Furthermore he emphasized that in his view as an Arab journalist, he felt that the Muslim world has a very poor understanding of what America is all about, its volunteerism, openness, tolerance etc. On the contrary, in his opinion the generally held perception of America in the Muslim world is one of a decadent, amoral society. Thus, any information campaign should also focus on showing the Muslim world what America is all about.